Interview: James Raggi

The Finnish Museum of Games had a roleplaying game exhibition in 2018 and published a book about the history of the Finnish roleplaying culture. According to it, about 250 roleplaying game products have been published in Finland. James Raggi's Lamentations of the Flame Princess company has made about a fifth of them. If the rumors are to be believed, Lamentations of the Flame Princess RPG is the most sold Finnish roleplaying game.

International media has interviewed Raggi several times before. The focus of this interview is Raggi's connections to the Finnish roleplaying scene and this publishing practice.

What are the sales numbers of Lamentations of the Flame Princess RPG? It is rumored to be the most sold Finnish roleplaying game, but nobody seems to know what kinds of numbers are we talking about. Also, what kinds of amounts do other rpg products published by Lamentations of the Flame Princess sell - hundreds, thousands, tens of thousands?

My retail distribution contract for some reason forbids me from giving precise sales numbers. But I will give some general information. The core rule book has sold over 10 000 print copies on its own. In total, we've sold over 200 000 units across the entire catalog, that includes print and PDF, since opening up shop in 2009.

How is the market for Lamentations of the Flame Princess products in Finland; do you have a solid customer base here? If we compare, say, Ropecon, Dragonmeet and Spiel Essen, how profitable it is to go to Ropecon?

Ropecon is by far the most profitable of the European conventions for me because I don't have to buy plane tickets or stay in hotels. My sales at Ropecon are effectively identical to sales at Spiel, and much much greater than at Dragonmeet. I think the UK Games Expo would be a better comparison than Dragonmeet to Spiel, and I do more business at Ropecon than the Expo. I think Ropecon might be the largest income in proportion to total attendees of any convention I do worldwide.

There are professionals who get their livelihood by working in the roleplaying game industry in the USA and UK. Publishing rpgs in Finland has almost always been independent, so scraping together enough to gain even a modest income is considered to be nigh impossible. Have you managed to make a living by publishing roleplaying games?

I've been legitimately making a living off of RPGs since December 2014, but before that I was still working full-time at this due to government aid for start-up businesses (for the first nine months starting in July 2009) and my wife at the time being very understanding with not getting my share of rent on time reliably.

In the runup to the release of *Red & Pleasant Land* in December 2014, I think I hadn't paid my share of rent in over a year. When that book came out, I paid it all back within a month and have been on top of things ever since.

What motivates you to make weird fantasy genre material for old school D&D rulesystem? Have you ever considered during these years to change either the genre or the system of your publications?

I don't think I could ever change the genre. It's just so open that you can literally do anything. The last three hardcover releases we did don't even feature anything supernatural in them, and they all fully fit in tone and atmosphere. There have been comedic releases, gonzo strange, horror, and straight-up high adventure fare and it's the combination of all of it under the same banner that sells "Weird Fantasy" more than anything that could be contained in one book. I couldn't imagine moving into any genre that has any real restrictions of what is or isn't allowed.

The system... eh. It's the worst system, except for every other system ever invented. I'm always wanting to tinker with it, but it's inevitable that when you live with a system for awhile that all the things it does well seem to disappear and the things it does less well just magnify in your mind. But that's every system.

There may be variation and fiddling but essentially I think I'll stay where I am system-wise. It's so modular you can rip out entire subsystems and replace them with something else completely different and basically create a Ship of Theseus system that has not one element left from the rulebook yet will functionally work just like it. It's rather amazing that way, and is very helpful to keeping things fresh.

The fifth edition of Dungeons & Dragons has gained momentum and fame during the last few years. Has its success affected the OSR scene?

The OSR was basically created as a reaction against third edition D&D, and really picked up momentum when fourth came out. There seemed to be a real solidarity of purpose, in creating for *this* kind of game that was very distinct from the game owned by the multinational corporation that was using the name of our favorite childhood brand

without it being the same game. Materials created for OSR games, or third, or fourth editions tended to all be quite distinct in form.

But fifth edition seemed to revert back to a game style a lot more acceptable to OSR types, and it being the big name brand backed by the multinational corporation meant it was much easier to find other people who wanted to play that. You could create material that would work in both OSR games and fifth edition without much hassle at all. People started playing OSR adventures using the fifth edition game system.

So the solidarity kind of broke (as was the plan of our evil corporate overlords), and without the common enemy, there was less reason to stay as a unified gaming bloc. So the bloc splits along different axes. Which isn't a problem, because wonderfully, the culture of creation, and most importantly for us publishers, the culture of buying from people who aren't the multinational corporation, remained. It was just the social element that began to fray.

And that's fine. Your RPG community should first and foremost be your gaming table, not people on the internet.

You started as a guy, who published OSR-material in a remote country for the international market and managed to make a breakthrough. Why do you think you were successful?

What you need to do if you are seeking success in a creative field: Figure out how you're different than everyone else, and concentrate directly on that. Don't try to fit in. Act like you own the place. Spare no expense; risk everything you can.

Acting like you own the place will command attention and almost force people to have an opinion about you. You have to spare no expense (and spend the money wisely) because appearances matter to a casual observer and if at first glance you look second-rate, you don't get another look. Focusing on your unique qualities will allow people that like you to really like you because you'll be offering something that nobody else does.

And those that don't like you, will really not like you. But that's the price you have to pay for sticking your head out.

You just have to decide... do you want to get along and be part of the crowd and have this be a hobby, or do you want to be serious about it and change your entire life to pursue it? Nothing happens unless you make it happen.

Building a brand is important to many people in the entertainment field, rpg designers and publishers included. Do you dream of Lamentations of the Flame Princess videogames, novels, films or other non-rpg licensed products?

On one hand, I'd love this. On the other hand, I'd want so much control that it really wouldn't be feasible. I'm not going to sign off and then collect a check without caring about the fidelity of the branded media. I'd try to be too hands-on and I don't know a damn thing about making games or novels or movies or anything like that.

Publishing rpg products usually requires to commission the text and art, edit them and make a layout, going through the actual publishing and setting up the marketing. What do you find is the most difficult or stressing part of publishing rpgs?

Post office rate changes. Posti getting rid of the Economy-class maxi-letters was the only economically impactful event of 2019 for LotFP. Sales are the same or greater in 2019 in PDF, retail, and convention sales... but direct orders? Absolutely gutted, and that started immediately in January with the new postal policies. And direct sales is how I made most of my money before this year.

It's that kind of infrastructural change that really makes business unstable. Will the post office change something that makes people not want to order directly? Will Paypal change something with their terms of service? Will banking regulations make it more difficult in Finland to pay freelancers and get paid for business-to-business sales?

All sorts of fun stuff that is completely out of my control and has a far greater impact than any "Is this person doing the work they said they would?" or even "Am I publishing things that are any good?" issues in actually producing a book.

The subject matter of Lamentations of the Flame Princess products has sometimes seen as controversial. What do you see as the limits for rpg publication in terms of content: are there some topics or issues you would refuse to publish?

There is an important distinction between "limits" and "taste" that applies here. "Limits" would be what other people will allow or disallow you to publish, and "taste" is what you yourself want or don't want to publish.

You need to obey your tastes like a mindless slave. You need to completely ignore limits. As soon as you even acknowledge that there are limits, you're done. You're creatively useless.

I think between *She Bleeds*, *Death Love Doom*, *Fuck For Satan*, *Carcosa*, and *No Salvation For Witches* I've proven that I'll go anywhere that either I or an individual author thinks that things should go.

And we've only scratched the surface of the historical horror involved in the early 1600s milieu I've decided to play around in. People are going to get mad and it's going to get ugly.

Lamentations of the Flame Princess products have been banned, criticized and they have received other strong negative reactions. Where do you find the strength to keep on going amid such situations?

The short answer is what other choice do I have but to keep going, whether I have the strength or not?

The long answer is that I have always strongly identified with those that have been punished for their thoughts, their words, and their art.

The attempted suppression of Dungeons & Dragons in the 80s of course looms large in my childhood, people just lying about it to make it go away and the people who just believed the lies without ever investigating anything for themselves. It's not just internet stories, kids... I knew people who had their books thrown away, friends at school forbidden to play RPGs because it would turn them Satanic, or make them commit suicide... or worse yet, friends that were forbidden from playing D&D were allowed to play every other RPG (including fantasy games with all the same elements) because they just cared about the label "D&D." The fucking ignorance.

It created in me tremendous lifelong distrust of the media, the clergy, teachers, and moral scolds of all types. They all lie to us, constantly. (Parents too, but mine were cool in this respect. Other kids' parents though, oh lord...)

This was also the era of the PMRC. I grew up in the New York area and we always listened to Howard Stern, and he was constantly being fined and suppressed by the FCC. My family later moved to Florida and then there was the obscenity trial of 2 Live Crew.

Later I learned about the legal issues suffered by people like Lenny Bruce, George Carlin, the Dead Kennedys obscenity trial, Mike Diana being convicted on obscenity charges for drawing comics, Pisschrist, Robert Mapplethorpe, Cop Killer, just a ton of garbage concerning the suppression of artistic expression during that time.

Multiple cases in the metal world of presses refusing to manufacture CDs or vinyl of certain bands. Cannibal Corpse having their first three albums (and only the first three) banned in Germany for a time, with it being illegal to perform songs off of those albums in the country... and then they did it anyway, just without announcing the songs because the cops in the audience to monitor them (!) didn't know the material, they just had lists of banned song titles.

Hell, in Finland a few years ago I saw the Nekromantik movies at Night Visions, and I learned when the first one came out in the 80s it was banned in Finland. There was a film

festival in Helsinki at the time that arranged for an audience to get on a boat to Estonia to see the film. Can you imagine being forced to sail to another country to be able to legally watch a fucking movie?

Nonsense, all of it. Unnecessary cruelty and blatant oppression. And it has to be resisted. All of it. From the first impulse. People have to be free to think and express those thoughts through their creativity without fear of punishment. And not only from government sources. Merchants shouldn't be able to apply this sort of pressure, and neither should the general public. People who want to create should be able to do so and be free to find whatever audience they can... and members of the general public should in turn be free to find material they find enjoyable or interesting, and support the creators, without gatekeeping or difficulty... And if you don't like it, then it can be your choice to ignore it. And that should be the only choice you have in the matter.

Nobody should seek to control what creative work others have available to them, and anybody who seeks that control should be fought. Flat-out.

So while it's always inconvenient and stressful in the moment, it's a source of pride that various works under the LotFP banner have been protested, suppressed, banned, copies destroyed. The Tipper Gores and the Mary Whitehouses reveal themselves and they are not on my side. Huzzah!

I can't imagine the situation ending anytime soon, because if I ever have doubts about something creatively, I interpret that doubt as fear and I then have to do it. If the result for me is difficulty, well, fuck 'em. The people against me may win, but I'm going to make them fight every single step of the way for their victory.

The fight to create freely, and to give others the courage and ability to create freely, is the highest calling I can aspire to. There is nothing more, or better, I can do with my life.

But I'm not perfect. I don't have limitless strength. I've made some concessions this past year that I am deeply ashamed of, that are against all my principles. And the reaction to that is telling, too. Performing the actions they want isn't enough; you're still a piece of shit who needs to be removed from the public space if you didn't do what they want with a smile on your face and love for them in your heart as they're stepping on your neck. Total submission in deed and thought is all that's acceptable. It's totalitarian in nature.

Which makes me wonder why I've ever made any concessions if the beatings will continue anyway... especially since the buying public seems not to give two shits either way.